

"Over the Top"

By An American Soldier
Who Went

ARTHUR GUY EMPEY
Machine Gunner Serving in France

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of hope flashed through him. Perhaps this man could tell him how to load the gun. Stooping over the body he gently shook it and the soldier opened his eyes. Seeing Lloyd, he closed them again and, in a faint voice, said: "Get away, you blighter, leave me alone. I don't want any coward around me."

The words cut Lloyd like a knife, but he was desperate. Taking the revolver out of the holster of the dying man he pressed the cold muzzle to the soldier's head and replied:

"Yes, it is Lloyd, the coward of Company D, but so help me God, if you don't tell me how to load that gun I'll put a bullet through your brain!" A sunny smile came over the countenance of the dying man and he said in a faint whisper:

"Good old boy! I knew you wouldn't disgrace our company."

Lloyd interposed: "For God's sake, if you want to save that company you are so proud of, tell me how to load that d—d gun!"

As if reciting a lesson in school, the soldier replied in a weak, singsong voice: "Insert tag end of belt in feed block, with left hand pull belt left front. Pull crank handle back on roller, let go, and repeat motion. Gun is now loaded. To fire, raise automatic safety latch, and press thumbpiece. Gun is now firing. If gun stops, ascertain position of crank handle—"

But Lloyd waited for no more. With wild joy at his heart, he took a belt from one of the ammunition boxes lying beside the gun, and followed the dying man's instructions. Then he pressed the thumbpiece and a burst of fire rewarded his efforts. The gun was working.

Trailing it on the Germans he shouted for joy as their front rank went down.

Traversing the gun back and forth along the mass of Germans, he saw them break and run back to the cover of their trench, leaving their dead and wounded behind. He had saved his company, he, Lloyd, the coward, had "done his bit." Releasing the thumb-

piece, he looked at the watch on his wrist. He was still alive at 3:38.

"Fritz"—a bullet sang through the air, and Lloyd fell forward across the gun. A thin trickle of blood ran down his face from a little, black round hole in his forehead.

"The sentence of the court had been 'duly carried out.'"

The captain slowly raised the limp form drooping over the gun and, wiping the blood from the white face, recognized it as Lloyd, the coward of D company. Reverently covering the face with his handkerchief he turned to his "noncoms" and, in a voice husky with emotions, addressed them:

"Boys, it is Lloyd, the deserter. He has redeemed himself, died the death of a hero—died that his mates might live."

That afternoon a solemn procession wended its way toward the cemetery. In the front a stretcher was carried by two sergeants. Across the stretcher the Union Jack was carefully spread. Behind the stretcher came a captain and forty-three men, all that were left of D company.

Arriving at the cemetery, they halted in front of an open grave. All about them wooden crosses were broken and trampled into the ground.

A grizzled old sergeant, noting this destruction, muttered under his breath: "Curse the cowardly blighter who wrecked those crosses! If I could only get these two hands around his neck his trip West would be short."

The corpse on the stretcher seemed to move, or it might have been the wind blowing the folds of the Union Jack.

CHAPTER XXV.

Preparing for the Big Push.

Rejoining Atwell after the execution I had a hard time trying to keep my secret from him. I think I must have lost at least ten pounds worrying over the affair.

Beginning at seven in the evening it was our duty to patrol all communication and front-line trenches, making note of unusual occurrences, and arresting anyone who should, to us, appear to be acting in a suspicious manner. We slept during the day.

Behind the lines there was great activity, supplies and ammunition pouring in, and long columns of troops constantly passing. We were preparing for the big offensive, the forerunner of the battle of the Somme or "Big Push."

The never-ending stream of men, supplies, ammunition and guns pouring into the front lines made a mighty spectacle, one that cannot be described. It has to be witnessed with your own eyes to appreciate its vastness.

At our part of the line the influx of supplies never ended. It looked like a huge snake slowly crawling forward, never a hitch or break, a wonderful tribute to the system and efficiency of Great Britain's "contemptible little army" of five millions of men.

Huge fifteen-inch guns snaked along, foot by foot, by powerful steam tractors. Then a long line of "four point five" batteries, each gun drawn by six horses, then a couple of "nine point

four" howitzers pulled by immense caterpillar engines.

When one of these caterpillars would pass me with its mighty monster in tow, a flush of pride would mount to my face, because I could plainly read on the name plate, "Made in U. S. A.," and I would remember that if I were a name plate it would also read, "From the U. S. A." Then I would stop to think how thin and straggly that mighty stream would be if all the "Made in U. S. A." parts of it were withdrawn.

Then would come hundreds of limbers and "G. S." wagons drawn by sleek, well-fed mules, ridden by sleek, well-fed men, ever smiling, although grimy with sweat and covered with the fine, white dust of the marvelously well-made French roads.

What a discouraging report the German airmen must have taken back to their division commanders, and this stream is slowly but surely getting bigger and bigger every day, and the pace is always the same. No slower, no faster, but ever onward, ever forward.

Three weeks before the big push of July 1—as the battle of the Somme has been called—started, exact duplicates of the German trenches were dug about thirty kilos behind our lines. The layout of the trenches was taken from airplane photographs submitted by the Royal flying corps. The trenches were correct to the foot; they showed dugouts, saps, barbed wire defenses and danger spots.

Battalions that were to go over in the first waves were sent back for three days to study these trenches, engage in practice attacks and have night maneuvers. Each man was required to make a map of the trenches and familiarize himself with the names and location of the parts his battalion was to attack.

In the American army noncommissioned officers are put through a course of map making or road sketching, and during my six years' service in the United States cavalry I had plenty of practice in this work, therefore mapping these trenches was a comparatively easy task for me. Each man had to submit his map to the company commander to be passed upon, and I was lucky enough to have mine selected as being sufficiently authentic to use in the attack.

No photographs or maps are allowed to leave France, but in this case it appealed to me as a valuable souvenir of the great war and I managed to smuggle it through. At this time it carries no military importance as the British lines, I am happy to say, have since been advanced beyond this point, so in having it in my possession I am not breaking any regulation or cautions of the British army.

The whole attack was rehearsed and rehearsed until we heartily cursed the one who had conceived the idea.

The trenches were named according to a system which made it very simple for Tommy to find, even in the dark, any point in the German lines.

These imitation trenches, or trench models, were well guarded from observation by numerous allied planes which constantly circled above them. No German airplane could approach within observation distance. A restricted area was maintained and no civilian was allowed within three miles, so we felt sure that we had a great surprise in store for Fritz.

When we took over the front line we received an awful shock. The Germans displayed signboards over the top of their trench showing the names that we had called their trenches. The signs read "Fair," "Fact," "Fate," and "Fancy," and so



Over the Top in a Charge.

on, according to the code names on our map. Then to rub it in, they hoisted some more signs which read, "Come on, we are ready, stupid English."

It is still a mystery to me how they obtained this knowledge. There had been no raids or prisoners taken, so it must have been the work of spies in our own lines.

Three or four days before the big push we tried to shatter Fritz's nerves by feint attacks, and partially succeeded as the official reports of July 1 show.

Although we were constantly bombarding their lines day and night, still we fooled the Germans several times. This was accomplished by throwing an intense barrage into his lines—then using smoke shells we would put a curtain of white smoke across No Man's Land, completely obstructing his view of our trenches, and would raise our curtain of fire as if in an actual attack. All down our trenches the men would shout and cheer, and Fritz would turn loose with machine-gun, rifle, and shrapnel fire, thinking we were coming over.

After three or four of it

attacks his nerves must have been near the breaking point.

On June 24, 1916, at 9:40 in the morning our guns opened up, and hell was let loose. The din was terrific, a constant boom-boom-boom in your ear.

At night the sky was a red glare. Our bombardment had lasted about two hours when Fritz started replying. Although we were sending over ten shells to his one, our casualties were heavy. There was a constant stream of stretchers coming out of the communication trenches and burial parties were a common sight.

In the dugouts the noise of the guns almost hurt. You had the same sensation as when riding on the subway you enter the tube under the river going to Brooklyn—a sort of pressure on the ear drums, and the ground constantly trembling.

The roads behind the trenches were very dangerous because Boche shrapnel was constantly bursting over them. We avoided these dangerous spots by crossing through open fields.

The destruction in the German lines was awful and I really felt sorry for them because I realized how they must be creaking it.

From our front-line trench, every now and again, we could hear sharp whistle blasts in the German trenches. These blasts were the signals for stretcher bearers, and meant the wounding or killing of some German in the service of his fatherland.

Atwell and I had a tough time of it, patrolling the different trenches at night, but after awhile got used to it.

My old outfit, the machine gun company, was stationed in huge elephant dugouts about four hundred yards behind the front-line trench—they were in reserve. Occasionally I would stop in their dugout and have a confab with my former mates. Although we tried to be jolly, still, there was a lurking feeling of impending disaster. Each man was wondering, if, after the slogan, "Over the top with the best of luck," had been sounded, would he still be alive or would he be lying "somewhere in France." In an old dilapidated house, the walls of which were scored with machine-gun bullets, No. 3 section of the machine gun company had its quarters. The company's cooks prepared the meals in this billet. On the fifth evening of the bombardment a German eight-inch shell registered a direct hit on the billet and wiped out ten men who were asleep in the supposedly bomb-proof cellar. They were buried the next day and I attended the funeral.

CHAPTER XXVI.

All Quiet (?) on the Western Front.

At brigade headquarters I happened to overhear a conversation between our G. O. C. (general officer commanding) and the divisional commander. From this conversation I learned that we were to bombard the German lines for eight days, and on the first of July the "big push" was to commence.

In a few days orders were issued to that effect, and it was common property all along the line.

On the afternoon of the eighth day of our "strafing," Atwell and I were sitting in the front-line trench smoking fags and making out our reports of the previous night's tour of the trenches, which we had to turn in to headquarters the following day, when an order was passed down the trench that Old Pepper requested twenty volunteers to go over on a trench raid that night to try and get a few German prisoners for information purposes. I immediately volunteered for this job, and shook



Preparing the "Chow."

because he turned in his direction and in a thundering voice asked:

"What did you say?"

The sergeant with a scarlet look on his face and his knees trembling, smartly saluted and answered:

"Nothing, sir."

Old Pepper said:

"Well, don't say it so loudly the next time."

Then Old Pepper continued:

"In this section of the German trenches there are two or three machine guns which our artillery, in the last two or three days, has been unable to tape. These guns command the sector where two of our communication trenches join the front line, and as the brigade is to go over the top tomorrow morning I want to capture two or three men from these guns' crews, and from them I may be able to obtain valuable information as to the exact location of the guns, and our artillery will therefore be able to demolish them before the attack, and thus prevent our losing a lot of men while using these communication trenches to bring up re-enforcements."

These were the instructions he gave us:

"Take off your identification disks, strip your uniforms of all numerals, insignia, etc., leave your papers with your captains, because I don't want the Boches to know what regiments are against them as this would be valuable information to them in our attack tomorrow and I don't want any of you to be taken alive. What I want is two prisoners and if I get them I have a way which will make them divulge all necessary information as to their weapons—you may carry your 'persuaders' or your knuckle knives, and each man will arm himself with four Mills bombs, these to be used only in case of emergency."

A persuader is Tommy's nickname for a club carried by the bombers. It is about two feet long, thin at one end and very thick at the other. The thick end is studded with sharp steel spikes, while through the center of the club there is a nine-inch lead bar, to give it weight and balance. When you get a prisoner all you have to do is just stick this club up in front of him, and believe me, the prisoner's patriotism for "Deutschland ueber Alles" fades away and he very willingly obeys the orders of his captor. If, however, the prisoner gets high-toned and refuses to follow you, simply "persuade" him by first removing his tin hat, and then—well, the use of the lead weight in the persuader is demonstrated, and Tommy looks for another prisoner.

The knuckle knife is a dagger affair, the blade of which is about eight inches long with a heavy steel guard over the grip. This guard is studded with steel projections. At night in a trench, which is only about three to four feet wide, it makes a very handy weapon. One punch in the face generally shatters a man's jaw and you can get him with the knife as he goes down.

Then we had what we called our "come-alongs." These are strands of barbed wire about three feet long, made into a noose at one end; at the other end, the barbs are cut off and Tommy slips his wrist through a loop to get a good grip on the wire. If the prisoner wants to argue the point, why just place the large loop around his neck and no matter if Tommy wishes to return to his trenches at the walk, trot, or gallop, Fritz is perfectly agreeable to maintain Tommy's rate of speed.

We were ordered to black our faces and hands. For this reason: At night, the English and Germans use what they call star shells, a sort of rocket affair. They are fired from a large pistol about twenty inches long, which is held over the sandbag parapet of the trench, and discharged into the air. These star shells attain a height of about sixty feet, and a range of from fifty to seventy-five yards. When they hit the ground they explode, throwing out a strong calcium light which lights up the ground in a circle of a radius of between ten to fifteen yards. They also have a parachute star shell which, after reaching a height of about sixty feet, explodes. A parachute unfolds and slowly floats to the ground, lighting up a large circle in No Man's Land. The official name of the star shell is a "Very-light." Very-lights are used to prevent night surprise attacks on the trenches. If a star shell falls in front of you, or between you and the German lines, you are safe from detection, as the enemy cannot see you through the bright curtain of light. But if it falls behind you and, as Tommy says, "you get in the star shell zone," then the fun begins; you have to lie flat on your stomach and remain

absolutely motionless until the light of the shell dies out. This takes anywhere from forty to seventy seconds. If you haven't time to fall to the ground you must remain absolutely still in whatever position you were in when the light exploded; it is advisable not to breathe, as Fritz has an eye like an eagle when he thinks you are knocking at his door. When a star shell is burning in Tommy's rear he can hold his breath for a week.

You blacken your face and hands so that the light from the star shells will not reflect on your pale face. In a trench raid there is quite sufficient reason for your face to be pale. If you don't believe me, try it just once.

Then another reason for blackening your face and hands is that, after you have entered the German trench at night, "white face" means Germans, "black face" English. Coming around a traverse you see a white face in front of you. With a prayer and wishing Fritz "the best o' luck," you introduce him to your "persuader" or knuckle knife.

A little later we arrived at the communication trench named Whisky street, which led to the fire trench at the point we were to go over the top and out in front.

In our rear were four stretcher bearers and a corporal of the R. A. M. C. carrying a pouch containing medicines and first-aid appliances. Kind of a grim reminder to us that our expedition was not going to be exactly a picnic. The order of things was reversed. In civilian life the doctors generally come first, with the undertakers tagging in the rear and then the insurance man, but in our case, the undertakers were leading, with the doctors trailing behind, minus the insurance adjuster.

The presence of the R. A. M. C. men did not seem to disturb the raiders, because many a joke made in an undertone, was passed along the winding column, as to who would be first to take a ride on one of the stretchers. This was generally followed by a wish that, if you were to be the one, the wound would be a "cushy Blighty one."

The stretcher bearers, no doubt, hoping that, if they did have to carry anyone to the rear, he would be small and light. Perhaps they looked at me when wishing, because I could feel an uncomfortable, boring sensation between my shoulder blades. They got their wish all right.

Going up this trench, about every sixty yards or so we would pass a lonely sentry, who in a whisper would wish us "the best o' luck, mates." We would blind at him under our breaths; that Jonah phrase to us sounded very ominous.

Without any casualties the minstrel troop arrived at Suicide ditch, the front-line trench. Previously, a wiring party of the Royal Engineers had cut a lane through our barbed wire to enable us to get out into No Man's Land.

Crawling through this lane, our party of twenty took up an extended-order formation about one yard apart. We had a tap code arranged for our movements while in No Man's Land, because for various reasons it is not safe to carry on a heated conversation a few yards in front of Fritz' lines. The officer was on the right of the line, while I was on the extreme left. Two taps from the right would be passed down the line until I received them, then I would send back one tap. The officer, in receiving this one tap, would know that his order had gone down the whole line, had been understood, and that the party was ready to obey the two-tap signal. Two taps

meant that we were to crawl forward slowly—and believe me, very slowly—for five yards, and then halt to await further instructions. Three taps meant, when you arrived within striking distance of the German trench, rush it and inflict as many casualties as possible, secure a couple of prisoners, and then back to your own lines with the speed clutch open. Four taps meant, "I have gotten you into a position from which it is impossible for me to extricate you, so you are on your own."

After getting Tommy into a mess on the western front he is generally told that he is "on his own." This means, "Save your skin in any way possible." Tommy loves to be "on his own" behind the lines, but not during a trench raid.

The star shells from the German lines were falling in front of us, therefore we were safe. After about twenty minutes we entered the star shell zone. A star shell from the German lines fell about five yards in the rear and to the right of me; we hugged the ground and held our breath until it burned out. The smoke from the star shell traveled along the ground and crossed over the middle of our line.

Some Tommy sneezed. The smoke had gotten up his nose. We crouched on the ground, cursing the offender under our breath, and waited the volley that generally ensues when the Germans have heard a noise in No Man's Land. Nothing happened. We received two taps and crawled forward slowly for five yards; no doubt the officer believed what Old Pepper had said, "Personally I believe that that part of the German trench is unoccupied." By being careful and remaining motionless when the star shells fell behind us, we reached the German barbed wire without mishap. Then the fun began. I was scared stiff as it is ticklish work cutting your way through wire when about thirty feet in front of you there is a line of Boches looking out into No Man's Land with their rifles lying across the parapet, straining every sense to see or hear what is going on in No Man's Land; because at night, Fritz never knows when a bomb with his name and number on it will come hurtling through the air aimed in the direction of Berlin. The man on the right, one man in the center and myself on the extreme left were equipped with wire cutters. These are insulated with soft rubber not because the German wires are charged with electricity, but to prevent the cutters rubbing against the barbed wire stakes, which are of iron, and making a noise which may warn the inmates of the trench that someone is getting fresh in their front yard. There is only one way to cut a barbed wire without noise and through costly experience Tommy has become an expert in doing this. You must grasp the wire about two inches from the stake in your right hand and cut between the stake and your hand.

If you cut a wire improperly, a loud twang will ring out on the night air like the snapping of a banjo string. Perhaps this noise can be heard only for fifty or seventy-five yards, but in Tommy's mind it makes a loud noise in Berlin.

We had cut a lane about halfway through the wire when, down the center of our line, twang! went an improperly cut wire. We crouched down,



Receiving First Aid.

cursing under our breath, trembling all over, our knees lacerated from the strands of the cut barbed wire on the ground, waiting for a challenge and the inevitable volley of rifle fire. Nothing happened. I suppose the fellow who cut the barbed wire improperly was the one who had sneezed about half an hour previously. What we wished him would never make his new year a happy one.

The officer, in my opinion, at the noise of the wire should have given the four-tap signal, which meant, "On your own, get back to your trenches as quickly as possible," but again he must have relied on the wispel that Old Pepper had given us in the dugout, "Personally I believe that that part of the German trench is unoccupied." Anyway, we got careless, but not so careless that we sang patriotic songs or made any unnecessary noise.

During the intervals of falling star shells we carried on with our wire cutting until at last we succeeded in getting through the German barbed wire. At this point we were only ten feet from the German trenches. If we were discovered, we were like rats in a trap. Our way was cut off unless we ran along the wire to the narrow lane we had cut through. With our hearts in our mouths we waited for the three-tap signal to rush the German trench. Three taps had gotten about halfway down the line when suddenly about ten to twenty German star shells were fired all along the trench and landed in the barbed wire in rear of us, turning night into day and silencing us against the wall of light made by the flares. In the glaring light we were

(To be Continued.)

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